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Feature

The Vulnerability of Distance Learning Initial Teacher Education (DLITE)

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The Vulnerability of Distance Learning Initial Teacher Education (DLITE)

Yvonne Bain*, Jayne Bruce, Douglas Weir, University of Aberdeen

Context to the development of DLITE

Graham Donaldson's (2010), "TEACHING SCOTLAND'S FUTURE, Report of a review of teacher education in Scotland" set in motion changes that are sweeping through the development, design, and delivery of models of teacher education in Scotland. His report highlighted fifty recommendations for changes to teacher education that impact on Universities, Local Authorities, teachers and teacher educators. Here, we will focus on just one aspect of the report and that is the recommendation for more flexible access to courses of initial teacher education:

"An increase in entry routes such as employment-based routes, part-time and home-study initial teacher education courses would enable more 'career changers' or people with young families to join the profession, and would allow people who live at a distance from a university to study, and gain school experience, in the area where they would seek to teach" (Donaldson, 2010, p. 27).

This recommendation is picked up in the Scottish Government's (2011) report "Continuing to Build Excellence in Teaching, The Scottish Government's Response to Teaching Scotland's Future".

"The Scottish Government will continue to encourage universities to widen access to teacher education, including through effective part-time and distance learning" (Scottish Government response, p.12).

Both Donaldson and subsequently the Scottish Government consider models such as Teach First (<http://www.teachfirst.org.uk/>) as being worthy of consideration, whereby academic graduates with high quality degrees are targeted to consider undertaking a two year work-based training programme for direct entry to teaching. In Scotland you are expected to be registered with the General Teaching Council of Scotland (GTCS) in order to be employed as a teacher and that registration requires that you have already gained a teaching qualification. The Teach First type of qualification is not recognised by the GTCS as there is no embedding of the academic study of education and pedagogy in developing and informing practice, an essential aspect of achieving the Standard for Provisional Registration. Presumably then, this is a position that would have to change if local authorities are to be enabled to employ unqualified trainee teachers. It would suggest that the GTCS would need to provide some other registration process for these unregistered teachers, with the caveat of an assessment of the teachers to ensure that the required standards for full registration are met before the two year work-based training process ends: without which the teacher could not remain in full-time employment. It is recognised by the Scottish Government that there would need to be further investigation of the impact of such a model: this is especially important in considering the vulnerability of learners and colleagues supporting teachers in the early stages of their career development.

The Government's response does mention other models of teaching qualification, citing the TQFE (Teaching Qualification for Further Education) offered by The University of Aberdeen, The University of Dundee, and The University of Stirling:

"Consideration of the Teaching Qualification for Further Education course may provide useful examples of practice" (Scottish Government's response, p.12).

The TQFE model is a work-based qualification (although Stirling offers a pre-service provision of the TQFE) targeting lecturers in the FE setting who already have experience of teaching. So, in one way the TQFE approach might be considered similar to the Teach First Approach in that there is 'on-the-job training' so to speak. However, there is a significant difference and that is the relevant vocational / professional experience that an FE lecturer has before becoming a lecturer. This is unlike the Teach First model which targets recent graduates who do not come from an experienced educational and professional work-based context when they are employed as teachers. It is worth keeping in mind the differences in the target groups for TQFE and Teach First as routes to teaching.

The DLITE model

Before the Donaldson review, the University of Aberdeen, in partnership with local authorities, sought to address local shortages of teachers by providing a part-time distance learning programme which was launched in 2003. This was a first in Scotland and was hailed for its innovation at that time, being reported in TESS (2003) as *"Highland Harvests Its Own"* with the then Education Minister, Peter Peacock, noting this as *"a very significant step forward"* in teacher Education. Hartshorn, B, Hextall, I et. al. (2005) GTCS report on "Widening Access to the Teaching Profession" also highlighted the University of Aberdeen part-time distance learning as an example of an *"innovative new approach"*. However, that particular model had a financial vulnerability – it was expensive to operationalise requiring for example, paid cover for local authority teachers in the provision of learning sessions and observations, as well as time and travel for University staff to cover wide geographic areas for small numbers of learners. Never-the-less, this enabled graduates living within the local authorities to gain entry to the teaching profession without having to entirely give up employment or move to where there was a campus-based provision in order to do so.

Over the years, the University of Aberdeen has successfully provided for online distance learning, including TQFE. The TQFE team have refined support and design of the online provision, embracing new technological opportunities to do so, such as embedding the use of online virtual classrooms.

The experience of working in partnership with the local authorities, and creating and supporting distance learning opportunities for engaging in a programme of initial teacher education, was a strong base on which to further refine and develop other models for widening access to the teaching profession. This has strongly influenced the design of a distance learning initial teacher education (DLITE) programme for entry to the teaching profession providing opportunities for school based practice and enquiry with professional and academic learning.

Headline news stories highlight some of the recent difficulties that local authorities have faced as a result of teacher shortages and therefore the need to provide 'local' opportunities to address the shortage of teachers:

"Teaching the full curriculum has become a problem in some Highland schools because of a shortage in supply teachers, it has emerged" (BBC News, November 2013).

"A primary school was forced to send pupils home because there was a shortage of teachers in the Highlands" (STV News, November 2013).

The DLITE developments have arisen in response to a need for the creation of sustainable alternative route for entry to the profession as called for by Donaldson and in response to teacher shortages in our partnership local authorities. The distance learning model, as in 2003, looks to create opportunities for local graduates living or working in the local authority to undertake a career change.

The model emerging for DLITE is one in which there will be a closer working relationship with the local authorities with a co-construction and co-delivery of curriculum elements of the teaching qualification with the University teacher educators and the local authority staff. These joint approaches will provide the professional learning opportunities for graduates to undertake the Professional Graduate Diploma in Teacher Education (PGDE) as a distance learning experience, supported with online learning and local authority network days, over an eighteen month period. This was launched at the University of Aberdeen in February 2014 with an intake of 41 participants from Highland and Aberdeenshire.

The DLITE model targets graduates with relevant experience and allows them to maintain employment provided that they can be released for the practice placements which are in block of four / five weeks as full-time teaching experiences. The local authorities (Highland Council and Aberdeenshire Council) will support this by promoting this opportunity to their employees and enabling staff to have leave of absence to undertake required placement experiences which are guaranteed to be in the local authority area. Aberdeenshire Council have specifically targeted their graduate employees such as classroom assistants and other employees with relevant experience and qualifications, to make a career change by offering paid leave of absence to reduce the financial vulnerability that may arise for participants. In both local authorities, it is hoped that the DLITE initiative will result in more local graduates making the decision to become teachers who have a willingness to remain in their home local authorities when qualified and will contribute to an increase in the provision of teachers available to fill teaching posts.

In some ways, the DLITE PGDE provision draws from the TQFE model, not only through the provision of online distance learning but also in the expectation of having a work-based skills set to draw from. In the DLITE provision, graduates are drawn from a professional, work-based background (as they are in TQFE) but they remain in employment within their own context until qualified for entry to the teaching profession. Unlike TQFE, and direct graduate programmes such as Teach First, the DLITE PGDE graduates will have the teaching qualification before taking up a teaching post. Unlike direct entry graduate programmes such as Teach First, the DLITE PGDE programme targets graduates who already have employability skills gained from working in a relevant work-based context experiences.

Perhaps models such as the DLITE PGDE will address the Donaldson recommendation of widening access without the vulnerability that might arise from employing unqualified teachers at the outset, and instead enables continuity of employment whilst making the transition to becoming a qualified teacher. In this way the University of Aberdeen seeks to support local authorities in providing a different and flexible approach to recruitment concerns.

Vulnerabilities

There are still vulnerabilities for DLITE. There is not a shortage of applicants to programmes of teacher education, but there are limitations to the places funded by the Scottish Funding Council. This can lead to tensions between the provision of the full-time campus-based provision and the distance learning provision if the model is not mutually beneficial for the University and the local authority partners. The sustainability of the model is critical if this is to be an ongoing opportunity for graduates. Currently there is some financial support from the Scottish Government for the development, but if a sustainable way forward between the local authority and the University is not enabled, then the model will again be too expensive to maintain.

There may be a financial vulnerability for the learners. There is currently a requirement by the GTCS for placements to be full-time placements and in blocks of no less than four weeks. Therefore, the DLITE PGDE participants have to be released from their current employment in order to do so. This can cause financial strain where there is no provision made for loss of income and the longer term goal of the career change to becoming a teacher is then at risk.

Distance learning is known to be a vulnerable learning process with participants dropping out due to the sense of isolation of the learning process. At the University of Aberdeen, we have years of experience of distance learning provision to bring to the model of provision for DLITE, looking to create learning communities that will support and encourage participants. The development of the learning communities will not only sustain the participants in the DLITE programme but create professional learning networks and relationships that can sustain career long professional relationships. The employability contexts that the DLITE participants will bring to these communities will help support their engagement with each other and will help widen perspectives of learning, education and educational systems.

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme report of 2006 "Improving Teaching and Learning in Schools" found that effective teaching and learning requires the attitudinal dispositions of inquiring teachers which demands more than developing skills-based competency:

"teachers need to possess frameworks of concepts and principles to guide the decisions they make in the unpredictable situations they often encounter in classrooms. They 'need to know what to do when they don't know what to do'".

As with other PGDE programmes designed for graduate entry to the teaching profession, DLITE encapsulates the idea of teachers who engage in enquiring about their professional practice, able to gain insight from, and critically examine, the interconnections between the academic and the practice elements as required for high quality teachers.

We look forward to the developments of the DLITE PGDE and the DLITE graduates in years to come.

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